



Twenty years ago, Joe Patten began working to upgrade the Fox Theatre. Today, he lives there.

PHANTOM OF THE FOX

By Wes Smith

It is rumored that in the hours of darkness, a slight, nimble figure slips from a hidden lair in Atlanta's Fox Theatre and goes to the massive Moeller pipe organ in the theater's orchestra pit. There, the story goes, the Phantom of the Fox wrenches haunting melodies from the organ until dawn, when he flees back to his hiding place.

Joe Patten, the theater's technical director and curator, cheerfully denies any furtive organ playing. "I've been accused of stealing down there at night and playing fugues, but I honestly cannot even play 'Chopsticks,'" he says. Patten does, however, admit to

ghosting about the Fox at all hours of the day and night, and in many ways he is indeed the Phantom of the Fox.

Patten actually lives in the Fox, in a dramatic 10-room, multilevel apartment on the south side of the huge building at Ponce de Leon and Peachtree, and his dedication to the restored theater's success is legendary. "Without Joe Patten, there would be no Fox Theatre today," says no less an authority than Bob Van Camp, the Fox organist for 35 years.

A shy, retiring mechanical wizard, Patten is generally recognized as the foremost authority on the Fox's mechanical systems, structure and history. He is also considered the driving force in the restoration of the 53-year-old movie theater, concert and exhibition hall. He

was a founder of Atlanta Landmarks Inc., the non-profit group behind the Save the Fox campaign. As the organization's secretary, he is now seeing the theater's finances move into the black side of the ledger for the first time in its checkered existence.

Patten, 55, moved to Atlanta from his native Lakeland, Florida, to work as a hospital X-ray equipment salesman and installation troubleshooter in the early 1950's. A movie house and theater organ buff since childhood, he showed up at the Fox one day and, quite literally, never left.

"I belonged to a club for theater pipe organ buffs and a number of us became concerned that the organ at the Fox, one of the largest in the nation, had fallen into disrepair," Patten explains.

Wes Smith's most recent story for the magazine was about Atlanta singer Peabo Bryson.

"We'd approached the theater's management about restoring the organ as a club project, but they didn't want to be bothered."

To Patten, who is fascinated by all things that chug and whine, the neglected "Mighty Mo" Moeller grand pipe organ at the Fox represented an irresistible challenge. By the early 1960's, it was "barely playable," according to Van Camp, who recalls that "the 18-foot cable that holds the wiring for the organ and allows it to go up and down with the orchestra pit was rotted out from neglect."

Patten convinced the theater's management to allow him and three others to repair the organ on their own time, with the theater paying for materials. Work on the organ began in February 1963, and though the enormity of the task eventually discouraged his co-workers, Patten stayed with the project. Laboring from midnight past dawn most nights for 10 straight months, he installed 36,000 feet of new wiring and overhauled the instrument's entire electro-pneumatic system, which sprawls in six separate rooms under the Fox stage. On Thanksgiving Day 1963, Van Camp gave a recital on the revitalized Moeller, and Patten admits the performance brought tears to his eyes.

"He was speechless when he heard it again," Van Camp says. "Joe made it completely playable. Others said it was impossible to repair. Joe, of course, answered that nothing is impossible."

While working on the pipe organ, Patten was often tantalized by the potential beauty of the decrepit theater around him. He obtained blueprints of the building's plumbing, electrical and heating and cooling systems. Within a short time, he knew as much about it as any of the long-term employees. He also became an expert on the Fox's history, down to which organists played what songs and when they played them.

Originally conceived as the Yaarab Temple Mosque of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, the Fox was designed to "out Baghdad Baghdad" architecturally. But even before con-

struction began, local Shriners realized they didn't have the \$3 million to finance their grand plans, so they formed a partnership with the Fox Theatre Corporation. The theater opened on the heels of the Depression, in December 1929, and as a result got off to a rocky start that it never really overcame. After the Shriners bailed out completely, a series of owners failed to breathe life into the Fox. Eventually it wound up in the hands of the city. By the time Patten arrived on the scene, the city had sold the theater to an organization known as Mosque Inc., a coalition of local theater owners that was using the Fox to show mostly B movies.

With his work on the pipe organ completed, Patten continued to haunt the theater in his free time. Soon he was badgering and cajoling the stagehands from their card games to polish some of its faded elegance. It was Patten and stagehand Onnie "Snookie" Friedman who unfurled the theater's famed "jeweled curtain" after year's of disuse. They'd been told it was too rotten to touch, but Patten found all it needed was a good cleaning. Patten also purchased a grand piano with his own money and arranged for it to be played by remote control from the pipe organ's keyboard because, he says, "it needed the hookup to sound right." All this time, Patten was never on the Fox payroll. But he didn't advertise that fact.

"There were so many managers coming and going in those days that they weren't sure just who I was and what I did. So after a while I was pretty much able to work and come and go as I pleased. Besides," Patten says, "the price was right."

While the theater's management had adopted a defeatist attitude about the Fox's future, Patten was constantly pushing for better use of the facility. When he learned in 1974 that the theater's owners were planning to sell it to Southern Bell Telephone Company for possible demolition, Patten set his teeth and his course of action. If he could save the pipe organ, he felt he could save the Fox.

"When word got out that

Southern Bell might buy the building and tear it down, Joe was the only one who knew enough and cared enough to do anything about it," says Van Camp. "He was smart enough to surround himself with knowledgeable and influential people, but I feel he saved the Fox single-handedly."

After a failed effort to sell the Walt Disney organization on the theater, Patten formed a team to accomplish his goals. Soon, he had recruited Atlanta attorney Robert Foreman Jr., along with Beauchamp Carr, vice-president of the Arts Alliance of Atlanta, and Georgia Tech architectural professor Patrick Cannell. They incorporated as the nonprofit fundraising group Atlanta Landmarks Inc., and Patten went public with his passion for the Fox. Those who knew him were amazed at the transformation in his demeanor.

"Up to that time, Joe was sort of a shrinking violet," says Van Camp. "But he was totally dedicated to the Fox. To save it, his whole personality changed. He became a media personality."

"He was the magnet that attracted other movers," adds Foreman. "He devoted countless hours and much of his own money to the effort."

Thanks to Patten's leadership and an awakened public, Atlanta Landmarks Inc. was able to pay off the building's \$1.8 million mortgage and another \$350,000 in interest after a four-year fund drive that ended in February 1978. Seven thousand people contributed to the campaign and the demolition permit that had been issued for the Fox was torn up.

Once the theater was safe from the wrecker's ball, Patten continued to speak to local groups and raise money for its renovation. Today, the theater shines again with fresh paint, new carpets and restored furnishings. And though not completed, the Fox's rebirth has spurred the revival of the entire neighborhood surrounding it.

Even with all he has accomplished, Patten's enthusiasm for the theater and his dedication to it have not dwindled. Several months

ago, he retired from his job with the X-ray company and went to work full-time at the Fox. Though Atlanta Landmarks has hired both a professional manager and a director of restoration, few would dispute that Patten is still the driving force, if not the beating heart of theater.

Patten's love affair with the Fox became more intimate three years ago when he moved from his former home in College Park into a 3,000-square-foot apartment he created, at his own expense, from unused office and storage space in the theater building. He is careful to stress that the move was first suggested by the board of directors, who wanted someone in the building as a caretaker. Since he was spending 16 hours a day at the theater anyway, Patten was the logical choice to serve as curator. He hired an architect and consulted the Fox's restoration director before remodeling the space, which

said I'd take it. I had to get a crane just to get it up here, but it makes for interesting conversation."

A flight of steep stairs leads to the equally spectacular second level, which holds the master and guest bedrooms, each with its own bathroom and dressing room, and an informal living room furnished with Patten's McIntosh stereo system, including homemade six-foot speakers, as well as his collection of antique X-ray tubes. A white spiral staircase goes up to the rooftop dome of the theater.

Talking with Patten about his life is like taking a tour of his sprawling apartment and the enormous theater around it — every turn seems to reveal new corridors and fascinating fixtures. As a child, he conducted marionette shows for his own entertainment, and in the

"The Fox is Mrs. Joe Patten," says Atlanta organist Bob Van Camp. "Joe is married to that theater."

will be turned over to the corporation upon his death, to be used either as entertainers' quarters or as the manager's home.

The multilevel apartment is far from completed and still sparsely furnished, but already it is apparent that once Patten implements all his plans, his bachelor pad will be one of the most unusual apartments in the city. The outside main entrance, on the Ponce de Leon side of the Fox, is protected by a wrought-iron gate that opens only when the proper code is punched on a key panel. A stairway inside the door leads up to the second-story apartment, opening on a small entranceway that features a Moorish-style tile fountain made by Tony Garcia, a craftsman who also does all the theater's tile and masonry work. Two custom-made amber, stained-glass windows grace the front hallway.

Patten's spacious office, with assorted pieces of hardware and blueprints cluttering his desk, sits off the front hallway and opens on the enormous formal living-and-dining room with 14-foot ceilings and floor-to-ceiling arched windows overlooking the city. The kitchen also occupies that level and is nearly equal in size to the living-and-dining room. It, too, is decorated with Garcia's colorful tile work, but its most outstanding feature is a hand painted, 4,560-pound steel safe that Patten says will serve as his liquor cabinet.

"The safe was in the area of the theater that is now Woody's," he says. "When they put the restaurant in, they wanted to get rid of the safe so I

Navy he staged USO Shows at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. He also once raced, and still owns, a rare 1956 Gull-wing Mercedes sports car. An expert marksman and gun collector, Patten can also reassemble the guts of an air-conditioning unit or pinpoint the heart of a piano concerto with equal acumen. He usually works in faded jeans with a ring of keys jangling from his belt, which sports an oversized brass "Fox" buckle. As he putters around the dimly lit stage of the cavernous theater, his small frame casts an imposing shadow.

"I'll never forget when a group of legislators came to the Fox for a hearing on whether they'd give us money for renovation," Foreman recalls. "Joe dressed up in a white suit and made his entrance by coming up on the stage lift. He put on a cracker-jack show that night."

Patten's acquaintances admit that they know him only slightly. But all point to his complete and selfless devotion to the Fox Theatre, a commitment that more than one person describes as "a marriage." Patten never married after a love affair ended sadly many years ago, but his associates say he has found a partner in the theater.

"In a television interview I once described the Fox Theatre as 'Mrs. Joe Patten,' says Van Camp. "I don't know if Joe ever heard that interview, and if he did he probably did not like that description. But it is true, he is married to that theater. And I'll tell you something else. He is the ideal man for the job. And how often does that happen anymore?" ■